

## Wallachia, from its Rise until the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The roots of what was to become Romania in the mid-nineteenth century goes back to Antiquity. From the Thracian peoples, known as Dacians and Getae, the Romans conquered a territory roughly bounded by the Danube, Tisza and Dniester Rivers. This conquest began in the reign of Emperor Trajan (reigned 98–117 CE) with victorious military campaigns in 101–102 and 105–106 CE. Trajan's administration created a new very large province known as Dacia (in the west and north) which later became the Medieval principality of Wallachia while the eastern part was joined to the existing Roman province Moesia, later turning into Moldavia. The Romans remained in place until 271 CE but were under constant attack from hostile tribes coming from the Eurasian steppes. The Romans eventually abandoned the provinces during the reign of Emperor Aurelian (reigned 270–276) because of an inability to defend the territory. The Romans left a legacy of Latin language, colonialism, a multi-ethnic society, and some important institutions.

After the Romans departed, waves of migratory peoples settled and the economy degenerated into small scale agriculture and animal husbandry. Contacts with the Roman world dwindled. Romanian populated lands formed a porous frontier against nomadic raiders. It was in essence a no-man's land. The Huns, Goths, Avars, Pechenegs, and Cumans invaded one after the other, culminating in the Mongol invasions in the mid-thirteenth century with the establishment of a Tatar Golden Horde basecamp in what is now Moldavia. Even when there were no large invasions, bands of raiding warriors massacred, plundered and pillaged villages taking captives to be sold into slavery. Particularly in eastern regions of Wallachia openness to nomadic raids meant that permanent field agriculture and stable villages were dangerous undertakings save in more defensible hilly and forested regions. The inhabitants had to be prepared to flee at a moment's notice, so dwellings in the flatland were kept rudimentary and villagers in the foothills wandered down to the flatland only in the summer, building temporary settlements and digging up small fields. Particularly in its most eastern parts the Wallachian flatland was barren, due to the climate being subject to hot dry summers making it more suited for shepherding than cultivated fields (Stahl, H.H. 1980a).

As stronger Central and Southeast European states formed elsewhere in the Medieval Balkan region, neighbouring Hungarian, Serbian and Bulgarian rulers competed to seize as much of the Romanian lands as possible (Magocsi 2002: 3–19; Hitchins 2014: 6–21). Inside the Romanian territory, population density remained sparse, land was abundant and transhumant tending herds of animals became the principal way of life. Subsequently, there was a surplus of land but a lack of inhabitants. The concept of private ownership of land was unnecessary. Traditional Romanian villages were known to redistribute land according to their members' needs and there was still much common land left over for pasture and small fields. Defence was local and formed small confederations of villages under local powerholders, who later became the nobles known as boyars.

Eventually, these small defensive alliances merged into larger entities under the rule of Princes. One of them grew inside the somewhat less invasion-prone area. An entity called the Țara Românească grew corresponding slightly with the south-central core of the former Roman province of Dacia. Later it was renamed the principality of Wallachia. It gradually crystallised into a stable country in the 1300s, owing to how armed struggles against the Hungarians pulled together fragmented local self-defence alliances. Wallachia was bounded in the south by the Danube River and in the north by the Carpathian Mountains. The mighty Olt River ran through the middle demarcating an important administrative, political and cultural boundary. Although there were no gold mines, several of the rivers flowing south from the mountains contained gold flakes in the sand. Grand Prince Basarab (c. 1310–1352), of partial Cuman origin, was the founding father of the independent Wallachian state modelling his rule on that of the Byzantine Empire: combining religious autocracy, Orthodox Christianity, tax collection and a defensive army. For many decades Hungary remained a threat, but it mainly campaigned north of the Carpathian Mountains, striking through Transylvania to gain access to the Danube River and the Black Sea. To distance itself from the Hungarian rulers who were avid Roman Catholics, Basarab's successors set up their own branch of the Orthodox church using Slavonic as a liturgical language and allying themselves with Constantinople.

Perpetual warfare reigned in the Black Sea region, and in Wallachia state institutions were only as strong as the state's ability to defend itself. Just as Wallachia succeeded to hold off the Hungarians, a new threat emerged from the south of the Danube River as the Turkish Ottomans expanded their conquests in South-East Europe taking neighbouring Bulgaria and Serbia in the late fourteenth century. Wallachia's Prince Mircea cel Bătrân (Mircea the Elder) who ruled 1386–1418, managed through military force, diplomacy and alliances

to temporarily keep the Ottomans at bay, but his principality had to pay a yearly tribute to the Sultan. As an Ottoman vassal state Wallachia preserved, at least in the first stage, its peace and independence in most internal matters and could choose its own rulers. In principle, Muslims were allowed only to enter for commercial reasons and were prohibited from building mosques. However, over time Ottoman dominance increased as did its pressure over the economy enforcing a state commercial monopoly at disadvantageous low prices. The rulers of Wallachia now adopted the official title *hospodar* (from the Slavic *gospodar*, meaning in this case sovereign lord) and were appointed by the Sultan. Until the eighteenth century the *hospodars* were chosen from leading Romanian clans, but thereafter they were chosen from leading Greek families established in Constantinople in the Fanar quarter. Hence forth they were called Phanariotes.

The boyar estates produced cattle and grain that was exported to Constantinople at fixed prices set by the Ottoman government. Through centuries of power-play, the position of the Wallachian Prince declined, and the boyar nobility grew stronger giving opportunity to increase their grip on the lives of dependent peasants (*rumâni* or *vecini*). The state, together with the many monasteries and nobility, owned most of the land and thus had many dependent serfs (*rumâni* or *vecini*) and slaves (*rob*). By the seventeenth century a handful of extremely influential families occupied the most important government offices and manipulated the elections of the Princes. But the boyars were disunited and grouped into rival clans and patronage networks. For livelihood the boyars and aristocrats became dependent on access to public office rather than living from the income from commercial agriculture.

The absence of primogeniture, low land productivity, and frequent redistribution of land prevented the formation of noble opposition to the authoritarian inclinations of princes on a territorially entrenched basis and made control of the people ultimately more important than control of the land. The same factors explain the lack of economic self-sufficiency, which ultimately made the Wallachian boyars dependent on public offices (Taki 2021: 19).

Already in the 1300s, when the embryonic Wallachian state developed, there were Gypsies, as well as Tatar slaves throughout the country. Slavery in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions dated back to ancient Greece and Rome (Finley 1981: 167–176). Enslaving captives was a widespread practice among the nomadic peoples coming from the steppe as well as within the Ottoman Empire. During the Middle Ages the Black Sea region grew into a hub for capturing and transporting hundreds of thousands of slaves to the Mediterranean (Achim 2004b, Achim 2021: 117–143). The Genoese Italians dominated the slave

trade and had several trading centres at the mouth of the Danube River. The forms of slavery that developed in the region were different from the hegemonic slavery of antiquity and the Islamic world, and also different from the commercial plantation slavery that developed in North and South America. In Wallachia the conditions for creating large-landed estates were lacking. Because land was abundant and yet not very fertile, while the population was very mobile, settlements were unstable. Even the slaves were mobile: in Wallachia the status of slaves varied by the degree of their personal autonomy and freedom of movement. The “Gypsy” slaves were a mix of Indian-origin people with Tatars and other enslaved ethnic groups, and they were employed as itinerant craftsmen or workers in rural villages. It became important for masters to strengthen their control over the people (mostly through tax collection) rather than over the possession of land. Various forms of serfdom and slavery tied people to their “owners” to whom they owed certain taxes (*dajdea*, meaning tithe) or days of unpaid service (*claca*, meaning corvée). As we will see in the following chapters, they also became part of the work force and economic base of a few privileged monasteries. Of particular interest is a donation made by Mircea the Elder in 1388 of 300 Gypsy families to the Cozia Monastery, which we believe could mark the beginnings of that monastery’s “ownership” over gold-washer slaves known as the Rudari. This donation is one of the very earliest mentions of the presence of Gypsies in Romania and the mention of families indicates that the status of slave was to be inherited.

Naturally, the repeated invasions put a halt to Wallachia’s full development as a state. The foreign influences continued into modern times with, during the eighteenth century, Austria and Russia beginning to gradually push back the Ottoman Empire out of southeast Europe. The eighteenth century’s near constant warfare often led to incursions and battles on Wallachian soil and sometimes to outright occupation. Slave-owning was not legal in the Hapsburg Austrian lands and in Russia the only form of serfdom of unfree peasants involved attachment to the land. When after the war with the Ottomans, Austria concluded a peace treaty in 1718 and it began a rather long occupation of Wallachia west of the Olt River. Suddenly the many Gypsy slaves, including Cozia’s gold-washers who resided there were free and when the occupation was over the experience of freedom shaped a unique Rudari identity. At the same time the Austrian occupation meant that many of the “Gypsies” were able to move west into other Austrian provinces, thus contributing to the dispersal of Romanian-speaking Rudari groups outside Wallachia, probably as far away as Bosnia. Similarly, the many Russo-Ottoman wars affected Wallachia. The most important impulses came during the Russian occupation of 1828–1834 when Wallachia was ruled by a Russian military governor, a

typical enlightened despot. The Russian administration reorganised Wallachia with an intent to use it as a future military base. It instituted reforms to swiftly improve the depressed state of Romanian agriculture. It brought with it the idea of emancipating serfs and *rob* slaves and made inventories of Wallachia's economic potential. This inventory was also a detailed ethnic, social and economic survey of the entire population. We present this inventory in Chapter 8, on the socio-economic condition of the Rudari, which will show the beginning of a transition from gold-washing into the making and marketing of wooden household utensils.